



Slouching Toward Babylon: My Fiftieth High School Reunion

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By Michael Uhl

Members of the class of 1961 gathered on an unseasonably cool September evening at the Hibernian Hall in Babylon, Long Island to commemorate the fiftieth year since our graduation from the local high school. More than eighty graduates had committed to attending. Adding spouses and partners, well over a hundred men and women filled the hall for the Friday evening buffet. Not to belabor the obvious, but most folks on the cusp of seventy don't much resemble their sixteen and seventeen year old selves. Throughout the room heads bobbed from name tags with yearbook photos of once familiar classmates to faces that for most of us time had rendered into perfect strangers. Navigating this disconnect between the unformed lives we briefly, if intensely, shared, then sundered by the triumph of commencement, and these same lives of who we have become since traveling separate ways, is the existential iceberg that gives one's passage back its perilous edge.



The Panther Tales staff. Michael Uhl is at right.

If unease, as I am told, is a common presentiment among those who weigh attendance at a milestone reunion, it was no great surprise that half our graduating seniors chose to stay away. Some had unassailable excuses, the dozen in our ranks who met untimely deaths. There were likely a few reluctant absentees with prior commitments, and several more perhaps too ill to travel. Others no doubt were daunted by concerns of distance, if not expense. A lingering resentment or old personal wound, or perhaps shame about current circumstances, might have fairly explained the absence of another tiny fraction among the no-shows. Beyond that it's futile to speculate on why most of these folks didn't come. Garden variety human ambivalence covers a lot of ground here.

My own feelings about attending were pretty mixed. In fifty years, except for a few bursts of contact around two previous reunions, I hadn't kept up with anyone, not even those I'd once been closest to. Yet I treasured the year and a half I'd spent at Babylon High where my classmates and I embodied what Aristotle more than two millennia ago described as "adolescents drunk with Nature the way old men are drunk with wine." That I might from that happy state replicate the lives of my parents, and our neighbors by making a life in or near Babylon... or anywhere on Long Island... never entered my mind. In defense of that decision, I placed in the war memoir I would later write, *Vietnam Awakening*, an epigram quoting the artist Robert Smithson that "suburbs exist without a rational plan, and without the 'big events' of history."

I don't mean to suggest any precocity on my part, that I was somehow drawn away from Babylon by the sirens of the cultural vanguard. Psychologically, I was an escapee. I just drifted toward whatever Babylon wasn't. By the end of my college junior year in Rio de Janeiro, if only through coincidence and proximity, I'd already gotten my first taste of the "big events of history," witnessing first hand the coup that brought Brazil's military to power for the next quarter century. I remember mostly the initial outrage among my fellow students, then the fear, and finally, over the many months before I left for home, the silence.

This caused a deep impression but was by no means a "Eureka" moment. I still fantasized about a career in foreign service against a background of cafes fronting sunny beaches like Copacabana and Ipanema, oblivious to craft or training demanded by politics or diplomacy. I resisted maturity, but by some instinct for self-preservation I already sensed that the anonymity afforded by living in a wider world than Babylon somehow suited, however vaguely understood, my particular brand of alienation. Meanwhile in my conscious mind an attitude took root that small town life was all pettiness and babbitttry, and thus I blithely erased the reality of fellow denizens who were simply better adjusted to the status quo than I.

Clearly I had authority issues. From an early age, and to an extreme, I had grown to resent the iron rule of Wilbur Conrad Uhl, my overbearing, emotionally distant father, who, by the time he was 95 and me past retirement age, I had grown rather fond of. My dad's problem was his social insecurity. He'd risen from what is known in union circles as "the aristocracy of labor" - his old man a master electrician and good provider - to the managerial class, and we lived in a neighborhood of similarly compensated professionals and businessmen.

Unlike most of them Dad didn't have a college degree. And that bothered him. But he also held a darker secret. He never formally graduated from Brooklyn Tech, a prestigious secondary school in New York City, like Bronx Science or the High School of Performing Arts, where admission is only through competitive examination or successful try-out. So I'm fairly certain Dad was a decent student. This topic was not discussed openly, but someone in my family once confided that Dad had been sick in his senior year, and had to drop out. The Depression only cost my grandfather a modest decline in work and wages, but Wilbur was of an age when tradesmen's sons of that era made their own way in the world, with or without a high school sheepskin. Dad really wanted to be an architect, going so far as to take night classes at Pratt Institute, but failed to apprentice himself in those hard times, ending up as a stock boy for a linen importer. By the time he'd settled his young family on Long Island, and taken a job at Republic Aviation, a major "defense" manufacturer of jet fighters like the F-84 and the F-105, the tardy diploma had caught up with him.

At Republic, Dad soon "broke through the line" from skilled labor, and advanced in management on the strength of his technical aptitude and talent for attention to detail. At home too, he tended toward the "busy-hands-are-happy-hands" school of upward mobility, and took refuge from family and community life in his many domestic projects. The results enhanced home comfort, and sometimes delighted us, but they didn't make Dad much fun to live with. While the disciplined writer in me has long acknowledged a debt to this Teutonic work ethic, there was little room for dialog or dissent in my father's house. But such self-regarding prerogatives of the rigid parental model of the fifties were hardly unique to our household; it was the Spirit of the Age.

In his alternative persona, Dad fit in very well and socialized easily among our many immediate neighbors, who partied with each other frequently. He was much admired for the design and execution of his non-stop improvements to our home and property. I think my major grievance with my father was his refusal to join the Babylon Yacht Club. Dad was allergic to the pretenses of certain members of the local elite, and, in

some fashion, I was drawn to them. And it was in that world where I spent a good deal of my time.

From my vantage point, the level of snobbery in Babylon simmered on a low burner. Sure there were the snotty cliques and little cuts and treacheries that are rampant among teenagers, but overall, I'd rate our student body as amazingly democratic, and united in its relentless pursuit of good times and recreations of every sort. It was a dull, and rare weekend when some classmate wasn't throwing a party, which, despite the efforts of parents to prevent it, almost always erupted into an open house. Schoolmates may have been welcome in degrees at such affairs, according to their position in the prevailing pecking order, but no one was excluded that I can recall.

I don't mean to imply that we were all friends, or even friendly. It's just that we inhabited the same parallel universe in relation to the adult world around us, and we functioned as independently as we could get away with, and at times defiantly resisted, covertly for the most part, the outdated codes of conduct imposed on us. Yet there were sufficient gaps in supervision when our elders had better things to think of, so it felt in such moments that we were truly running free.



Michael at Babylon Union HS and Susan at Jones Beach on Long Island

As individuals we students traveled in our respective clans and circles, mine over-represented by classmates from previous years at the same parochial schools. But virtually every face among the 200 photo portraits of graduating seniors in our yearbook, the 1961 Trawler, conjures for me, minimally, the intimacy of recognition – from home room and class room, from gym and study hall, from cafeteria period, from attendance at the Big Games and Prom Weekends, from Dramatics Club and Panther Tales, our student newspaper, from holiday dances and student assemblies, from sailing on the bay to bonfires on the ocean beaches, from three-season pick-up games on

the courts at St. Joe's, and from merely being passed in the hallway day after day in a small school – even if I never exchanged more than a word or a sentence with any given number of my classmates. I knew them, and they knew me.

Fifty years later, that is no longer the case. And so I wondered, what trace of that distant, faded familiarity could, or really needed to be rekindled in my present world around tables of ten at a prime ribs social? Oddly, I had no such reservations at our 40th reunion. We all seemed so much younger then, and I myself still eager to “make contact,” however superficially, with whomever I encountered. Ten years farther on I have undergone a sea change. I'm subtracting much from habitual activities, making choices that connect me more to the moment. My public cover was becoming a burden to me, and I began searching for – and finding – much contentment in the Small Life. What I mean by that would require another essay to define. But I can say I'm amazed at how crowded a small life can be. In such a mood, I knew that whatever there was to be recaptured from the past by attending this reunion resided less in rubbing elbows with my fellow superannuated classmates than in revisiting the places where once our lives had crossed.

It was in the late morning on Friday when my wife Susan and I pulled into Babylon, and went immediately to Argyle Park, the comely village commons with its sizeable pond and ever-present colony of white swans. As small children we would toss them stale crusts of Wonder Bread, but feeding is no longer permitted. I had acquired a love of ice skating on this pond in the winters, and I was pleased that little in the appearance of the park had changed. We left the car and walked off to the village, which had gotten its offbeat name from a letter written by a mother to her son complaining that a newly opened inn near his homestead would turn the quiet colonial backwater into “a veritable Babylon.”



The imperial Robert Moses

Few of the downtown shops from my youth remained, of course, and the facades of many buildings and storefronts had been altered beyond recognition, but the general scale and size of the place had not. Obviously the demographics have accompanied the passing years; the place seemed busier, more populated, perhaps. There was one odd note. A rather imperial statue of Robert Moses, the controversial master builder of parks and parkways in New York and on Long Island, who was probably Babylon's most illustrious resident when I was growing up there, had been installed on a patch of lawn before the old municipal building.

Turning south from Main Street toward the bay, we walked on a shaded street of fine old Victorian homes to the block where my own family had lived, and were surprised to see the house was again for sale. [I've since heard it had turned over quickly.] Along with its companions, some twenty homes in all, this small development had been built in the early fifties on what were the grounds of the last estate in the village, long in ruins, and a relic of the era when Babylon was a summer resort for city folk, if not an actual fleshpot.

Later we drove among the surrounding streets, essentially following my boyhood newspaper route, and passing the spot duly marked by a memorial signpost where, in 1901, Guglielmo Marconi had established an early wireless station for communicating with ships at sea. Only when we neared the bay, about a quarter mile further south

from where I'd lived, were there signs of a discordant skyline, and the filling in of what in my youth had been the uninhabited tips of estuaries and marsh lands with here and there the grotesque apparition of a Mc Mansion by the sea mocking the modest vernacular architecture that is characteristic of the rest of the village.

Over the next two days we attended the reunion functions, four in all. Saturday morning following the ice breaker of the previous evening, Susan and I joined a small contingent who'd roused themselves early for a tour of Babylon High guided with considerable grace by the current principal. The school complex was larger, much transformed, but two spaces seemed untouched by time, the old auditorium – the theater where we staged three plays our senior year, and the original gym – now a workout room for women gymnasts – could not have seemed more like preservations of the 'fifties' had they been recreations on a sound stage.

I had difficulty following the principal's presentation, as I had all weekend with table conversation at the formal events. My hearing aids had chosen to malfunction only days before the reunion, and they were off for repair. What with all the predictable cacophonies surrounding our successfully choreographed banquet later that night, from the background hum of a hundred voices, the steady traffic of the wait staff, and the DJ-driven rock oldies of our era, when not on the dance floor I sat in a fog of silence like an outlander who did not understand the local dialect.

I did better in smaller groups, and Susan and I found good company all weekend among a half-dozen or so of my old school chums and their spouses. This was the ideal size of a gathering with whom one could actually share a few convivial moments over a two-day interval, the way you might when traveling anywhere, forming intimate if highly perishable bonds with companionable strangers, all fully complicit that the probability of such encounters extending beyond that special moment is unlikely, but never impossible.

Susan and I spent much of the free time the reunion schedule permitted driving short distances to a variety of destinations I still felt attached to emotionally, none with more enthusiasm than the ocean beaches that residents hereabouts can conveniently reach by road or water. Long Island's barrier islands are pristine, to my eye unchanged in the five decades since I idled there on endless summer days. You can ride for miles along these beaches unspoiled by commercial development, and with few rivals along the Atlantic seaboard. Susan was impressed. She liked most of what she'd seen since our arrival. She found the village appealing. And so I was reminded though her eyes that Babylon was a more pleasant place to be from than I had long imagined.